



Rabies

Health Education Facts

Rabies is an infectious disease that affects the nervous system; including the brain and spinal cord of animals and humans. Once it develops, it is nearly always fatal.

What Is Rabies?

Rabies is caused by a virus in the saliva of infected animals. A person is exposed to rabies when he or she comes into contact with live rabies virus, generally by the bite of a rabid animal. There have been *rare* reports of persons developing rabies after “non-bite” exposures (licks by rabid animals, the air in caves infested with rabid bats, and breathing aerosolized rabies virus in the laboratory). Not all exposures result in rabies. However, because of the seriousness of infection, everyone exposed to rabies should get treatment.

What Animals Carry Rabies?

All warm blooded animals, including people, can get rabies. However, the disease is mostly found in biting animals such as dogs, cats, bats, skunks, foxes, wolves, coyotes, and raccoons. Rabies is present in all parts of the continental United States. It is one of the most widespread diseases known, being found in the Arctic as well as in the temperate and tropical countries of the world. It occurs in animals during any season of the year. Many cases are reported in livestock, including cows, horses, hogs, and sheep. Livestock generally contract the disease from the bites of infected wild animals, such as skunks and foxes.

The disease in wildlife, especially in skunks, raccoons, and bats, has become increasingly prominent in recent years, accounting for more than 70 percent of all reported cases of animal rabies. Wild animals are the largest source of rabies infection for people and domestic animals in the United States. Wild animals are not suitable pets and may expose people to an unnecessary risk.

Incubation Period

The incubation period is from the time the virus is introduced into the body until it reaches the brain and produces symptoms. In people, the incubation period varies from nine days to a year or more (the average is about 45 days).

The length of the incubation period is influenced by the location and severity of the bite. Bites on the head and neck usually produce symptoms most rapidly.

Prevention

Although there have been rare reports of recovery from clinical rabies, the disease is almost always fatal. Rabies may be prevented by a pre-exposure vaccine, thorough cleansing of the wound, and a post-exposure immunization.

A. Pre-Exposure Vaccine

The pre-exposure immunization is generally used by people in high risk groups (veterinarians, animal handlers, certain laboratory workers, and those living in areas of the world where rabies is a constant threat). People who have frequent contact with dogs, cats, foxes, skunks, or bats should also be considered for the pre-exposure vaccine. Pre-exposure immunization does not eliminate the need for post-exposure treatment; it only reduces the amount of treatment needed. Consult your physician if you think the pre-exposure immunization would be of value to you.

B. Wound Cleansing

Immediate and thorough treatment of all bite wounds and scratches is perhaps the most effective means of preventing rabies. Wounds produced by the bite of a rabid or potentially

rabid animal should be thoroughly cleaned with large amounts of soap and water.

C. Post-Exposure Immunization

A physician should be consulted immediately if someone receives a wound from a rabid or potentially rabid animal. The physician will decide on the appropriate type of post-exposure treatment.

Exposure to rabies may be minimized by staying away from all wild animals, especially those acting abnormally; and by vaccinating all pets.

Biting Animals

A healthy domestic dog or cat that bites a person should be caught, confined, and observed by a veterinarian for 10 days. Any illness in the animal should be reported immediately to the local health department.

If the dog or cat develops signs suggestive of rabies, the animal should be killed and the head removed and shipped under refrigeration to a qualified laboratory designated by your local or state health department for examination.

Early signs of rabies in wild or stray animals are not easy to diagnose. In addition, the length of time from when they can transmit rabies to the time they show signs is not well known. Therefore, any wild or stray animal that bites or scratches a person should be killed at once (without damaging the head, if possible), and the body brought to the local health department. Use gloves when handling the animal and place the animal in a double layer of plastic bags to avoid exposure to the rabies virus.

Control of Rabies

Vaccination of all dogs and cats against rabies is recommended and is necessary if rabies is to be controlled. All stray dogs and cats should be impounded and humanely destroyed if a home cannot be found for them.

Summary

If you are exposed to a rabid or potentially rabid animal, cleanse the wound immediately and consult your physician. Capture the animal if possible and take it to a veterinarian or the local health department. Do not take in wild animals as pets.